

Teaching expository text structure awareness

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It has been well established that skilled readers use a variety of strategies to comprehend written text (Calfee & Drum, 1986; Stanovich, 2000; Sweet & Snow, 2003). Many students will not develop these skills without the explicit teaching of comprehension strategies. Research shows, however, that the explicit teaching of comprehension is uncommon. Pressley, Wharton-McDonald, Mistretta-Hampston, and Echevarria (1998) reported a scarcity of comprehension instruction in grades 3–6. As put by Pressley et al., “We were struck by the almost complete absence of direct instruction about comprehension strategies” (p. 172). It is not surprising, then, that many students experience problems comprehending written text, especially the more complex expository text.

A summary of key findings from the research includes the following:

- Many students experience problems comprehending expository text. There are many reasons for this, one being that they can’t see the basic structure of text. Some students get lost in the words and can’t see the big picture (Dymock, 1998; Dymock & Nicholson, 1999).
- Some students require direct instruction in how to go about comprehending more complex expository text structures (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 1999; Pressley, 2002; Vacca, 1998).
- Teachers play an important role in assisting students to develop reading comprehension strategies including expository text structure awareness (see Dymock, 1997, for a review of text structure research; Dymock & Nicholson, 1999; Pearson & Duke, 2002; Smolkin & Donovan, 2002).

- Students who have a good understanding of expository text structure have fewer problems with comprehension (Dymock & Nicholson, 1999).
- Teaching expository text structure awareness has a positive effect on reading comprehension (Dymock & Nicholson, 1999; Pearson & Duke, 2002).
- Expository text structure awareness is one reading comprehension strategy that should be explicitly and systematically taught (Sweet & Snow, 2003).
- The Literacy Experts Group’s report (1999) to the New Zealand Secretary for Education recommended that, “Especially from year 3, more attention should be paid to the teaching of comprehension skills, across a range of text types, including **expository texts**” (p. 6; emphasis added). Some suggest that explicit teaching of comprehension strategies, to enhance comprehension of exposition, should begin during year 1 (Duke, 2000; Pearson & Duke, 2002).

How to go about explicitly teaching expository text structure awareness

Exposition can be written with many types of organizations or structures. These structures are used to organize discourse, and often they are very complex. Students should be taught explicitly how to recognize and use expository text structures to improve comprehension and recall. Knowledge about how expository text is structured, however, will not guarantee comprehension, but having a clear under-

standing of how the text is structured will help the reader build a coherent model of the text.

Expository text types can be divided into two groups, texts that describe and texts that are affected by time (Calfee & Patrick, 1995). Young readers encounter three descriptive text types and one sequential text during their first six years at school (Dymock & Nicholson, 1999). Teaching students the many expository text structures that writers use, and showing students how to organize the material graphically, can have a positive effect on comprehension. Demonstrating how to diagram the various expository text structures enables students to “see” how texts are constructed. These strategies enable the reader to make order out of the “sea of words.” Creating a clear structure is critical for learning and thinking (Chambliss & Calfee, 1998).

The CORE model (*Connect, Organize, Reflect, Extend*) provides a framework for lesson design when teaching the structure of expository text (Calfee, Chambliss, & Beretz, 1991; Calfee & Patrick, 1995; Chambliss & Calfee, 1998). An effective lesson *connects* students to the topic. Connectedness is the link between what the reader knows and what is being learned. Teachers should connect students to the content (e.g., native birds) and the text structure (e.g., matrix or compare/contrast). Calfee (1993) suggested that the teacher can build on the reader’s knowledge base by focusing on what the reader knows, rather than on what the reader does not know. *Organize* includes the principle of keeping the lesson simple and the physical organization of the text. This includes the list, web, weave, and string text structure diagrams that are discussed in this article. Teachers need to explicitly teach students that expository text has many structures. Diagramming (or organizing) the text enables students to “see” the structure and to understand and remember it better. These structures are critical in cognitive learning as the graphic organizers provide the reader with tools for creating order out of the text. *Reflect* is where students explain or critique content, structures, and strategies (e.g., What kind of text did we analyze today? How did we know it was a web? Why did we diagram the structure?). Finally, an opportunity is provided to transfer (or *extend*) learning to new topics. This extension offers a chance to reflect, as well as an opportunity for meaningful practice.

Sweet and Snow (2003) recommended that teachers model the strategy (e.g., teach children how to identify the text structure the writer has used and how to diagram its structure). Following this, the teacher should provide guided practice by working alongside the students as they diagram the text.

The following section describes common expository text structures students encounter in primary school (i.e., descriptive and sequential structures). The section forms the organize part of the lesson. After students are connected to the topic by well-developed questioning strategies that encourage them to think about what is being learned, the teacher then models how to diagram (i.e., organize) the text. The included figures demonstrate how four common expository text structures can be organized. Students then reflect on what they have learned (e.g., What have we done in this lesson today? Why have we done it?). Finally, an opportunity to extend their understanding to new material should be provided (e.g., “Today we created a web based on the descriptive article on the bald eagle. With your partner develop a web on the New Zealand kiwi, a flightless native bird.”).

Common expository text structures

Students encounter several common expository text structures during their first six years at school, and beyond. Diagrams of each enable students to “see” the structure the writer has used. It is recommended that only one text structure be taught at a time.

Descriptive structures

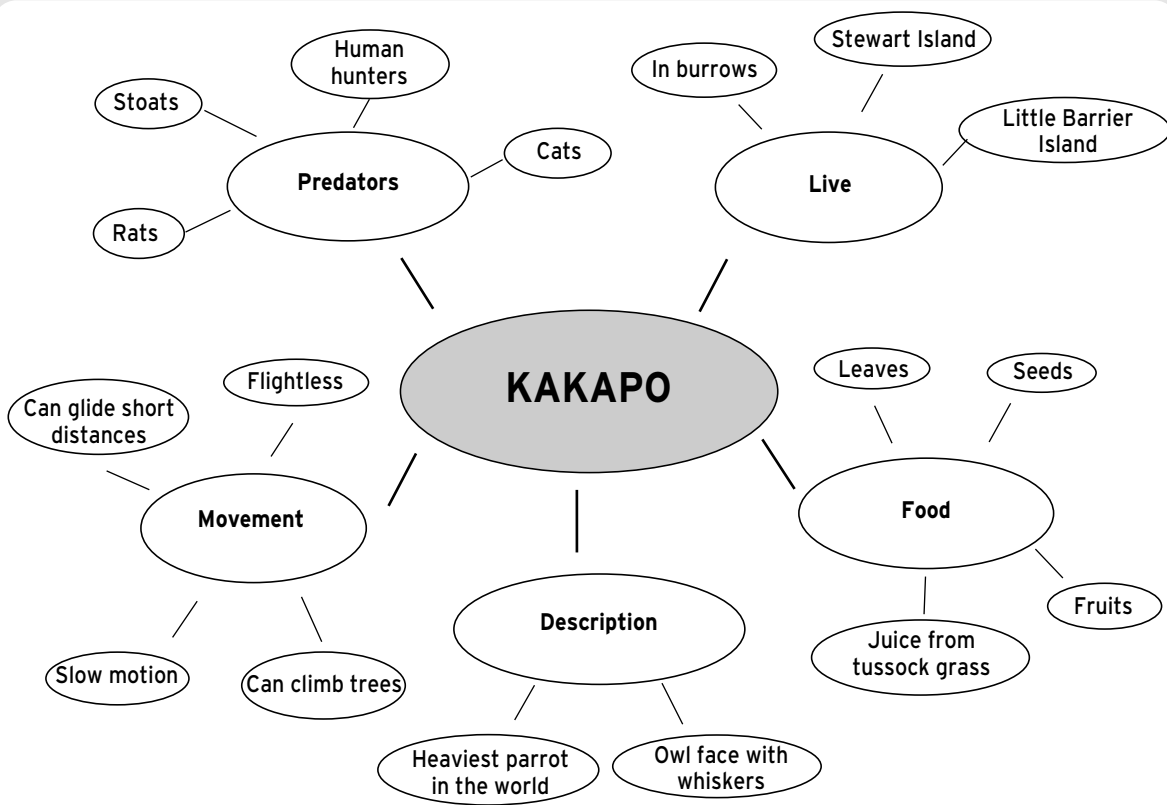
Descriptive patterns focus on the attributes of something. Three common descriptive patterns found in school reading material for 6- to 12-year-olds include the *list*, *web*, and *matrix* (compare/contrast).

A basic descriptive pattern is the *list* (Calfee & Patrick, 1995). This may be as simple as the grocery list; a list of countries where English is the dominant language; or, in science, the attributes of penguins (e.g., black and white, eat fish, can’t fly). With the list, it doesn’t matter what goes first. The list pattern in Figure 1 is from the article, “Picking

FIGURE 1
Contents of a sparrow's nest



FIGURE 2
Characteristics of the kakapo



Up Rubbish.” Gary Brackenbury (1996) listed the material found in a sparrow’s nest.

The *web* is another descriptive pattern (Calfee & Patrick, 1995). In the web the attributes of an object are discussed. The attributes have a common link. For example, the article may be discussing the characteristics of snails or the features of San

Francisco. The web diagram in Figure 2, completed by an 11-year-old, is based on an article on the kakapo, a New Zealand native bird (Bryant, 1990).

The *matrix* compares and contrasts two or more topics (Calfee & Patrick, 1995). For example, the author may be comparing the features of brown, polar, and black bears; native birds; two

FIGURE 3
Matrix for animals and mud

| Animal | Does the animal like mud? | What animal does in the mud | What mud does for the animal | Size of animal |
|---------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|----------------|
| Pig | Yes | Rolls | Keeps it cool | Large |
| Frog | Yes | Sleeps | Helps it hide | Small |
| Water buffalo | Yes | Stands | from enemies | Very large |
| Rhinoceros | Yes | Bathes | Keeps bugs away | Very large |
| | | | Protects it from the sun | |

Brazilian cities; or volcano types. Figure 3 is based on an article on mud, written at the 6-year-old level (Meharry, 2001).

Sequential structures

Sequential structures present a series of events that progress over time. Normally, sequence texts are set out in a first-to-last pattern.

The *string* pattern (Calfee & Patrick, 1995) is a common pattern in beginning reading material and also in the material students encounter at the high school level. In the string pattern a chronological description of events is given (e.g., steps involved in baking bread or harvesting carrots). Or it could refer to the sequence to follow in working out a math problem. Or in science it could refer to the life cycle of the duckbilled platypus. The string pattern in Figure 4 is based on a section of *The Duckbilled Platypus: Nature's Experiment* (Bremer, 1984). The text is at the 10- to 12-year-old reading level.

Research shows that children who have a good understanding of the structure of expository text have fewer problems with comprehension. While some children are able to figure out the different textual patterns on their own, there are others who are not so lucky. Research shows that many students are unaware that exposition follows an organized pattern. These students require direct instruction in how to go about comprehending expository text structures (Dymock & Nicholson, 1999; Moore et al., 1999; Vacca, 1998). Explicit teaching of text structure awareness has a positive effect on comprehension (Pearson & Duke, 2002). It appears that the teacher has an important role to

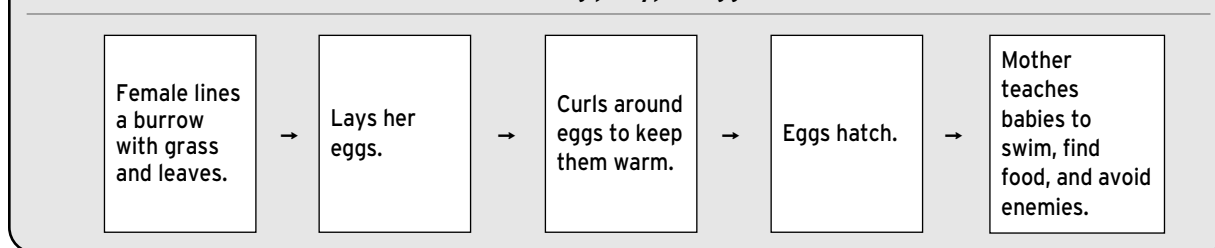
play in assisting children to develop a good understanding of expository text structure.

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FIGURE 4
Hatching platypus eggs



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